

***One-to-one in the Inclusive Classroom: The Perspectives of Paraeducators Who Support Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder***

**Christopher Healy**

University of Maine at Orono

***Abstract***

In public schools nationwide, students categorized with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have traditionally been removed from the general education setting, where they were taught in isolation by special education personnel. More recently, research on the learning needs of students with ASD has suggested the importance of including them along side their peers. As a result, these students and their paraeducators have entered the classrooms of content area teachers. The context can create challenges for the paraeducator and their special education supervisor who has authority for their training and supervision. This study examined five paraeducators employed in a single high school as they enter general education classrooms to support the particular students they are assigned. Participants discussed the need to understand the full range of behavioral manifestations of autism as a starting point for their work. Once participants acknowledged their student's differences, however, they identified the instructional context their students needed in order to succeed in the inclusive classroom setting.

***One-to-one in the Inclusive Classroom: The Perspectives of Paraeducators Who Support Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder***

“Should I follow him into the student bathroom?” I remember a perplexed Mr. Johnston asking at the end of a long school day.

“Or, should I just stand outside in the hallway and wait for him?”

He took a deep breath then exhaled. I was baffled by his confusion and paused a moment.

“Actually, Mr. Healy,” he said, smiling awkwardly, “I don't know how comfortable I am with this bathroom situation. I think I'll just continue to wait for him in the hallway.”

I nodded my head in agreement.

For Mr. Johnston, a one-to-one paraeducator, this was one of a host of challenges in his first week. As his supervisor, I remember a face that at that moment seemed stressed. The job, it appeared, was more than he expected.

Mr. Johnston's position had been created mid-year after a student diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) involved himself in a physical altercation with three of his peers. Following the fight, our school assembled the required Individualized Education Planning (IEP) Team, and we developed a behavioral modification plan. We agreed that an additional staff member would be required in order to fully implement our supports. I had provided Mr. Johnston a copy of the plan and explained it to him when he was hired. The school principal reinforced that one of his responsibilities necessitated "sticking to the elbow" of this student. And so the plan was implemented.

Now, in his first week on the job, he was adjusting to the demands of these responsibilities.

"Besides," Mr. Johnston continued, "he leaves every class to go to the bathroom. And he stays in there a long time."

The physical monitoring of this student was not the only demand Mr. Johnston faced. Earlier in the day I had received two e-mails from teachers indicating the need for Mr. Johnston to provide closer academic monitoring. One teacher suggested that Mr. Johnston record his lecture notes, take down nightly homework assignments, and quiz the student during study halls prior to tests. The other e-mail informed me that the student was failing her class and that this student would need additional support from Mr. Johnston in order to pass.

I found a blank student planner for Mr. Johnston and talked with him about supporting the student academically. Mr. Johnston looked skeptical.

"The kid's smart," he said. "But, he won't even talk with me. How's this going to happen?"

The following Monday Mr. Johnston called me from the guidance department. He was with his student and the counselor. I entered the counselor's office to find the student crying and repeating that he was a "zero" and a failure. He "wanted to die." Worried by the student's comments, the counselor stepped out of his office and contacted his parents. We held an emergency IEP meeting later that day to address the mounting concerns we had for this student.

What makes describing these moments difficult is the fact that I have had to coordinate services for students requiring one-to-one, paraeducator support in each of the last eight years. What I have found most challenging is that while my job description includes supervisory responsibilities, the demands of my job prevent me from giving Mr. Johnston and others the time and professional assistance they need. The imposing of an inclusion mandate has moved paraeducators from the special education setting and into the general education classroom. Yet, the supervising responsibilities of paraeducators remain with the special education teacher. Given the structural limitations of these situations, my support often turns on inferences made by general education teachers and administrators, and informal consultation time with paraeducators. This frustration is increased by the

lack of written job descriptions and clear definitions of responsibilities for the paraeducators at my school.

At present, I supervise four paraeducators among the eighteen at my high school. In my work with these four, including Mr. Johnston, I began to think about the demands these support personnel face as they work one-to-one with students in and outside the inclusive classroom setting. I grew particularly interested in the demands that six of the eighteen paraeducators in the high school face, namely one-to-one support of students diagnosed with ASD. To support these paraeducators, I realized the need to better understand their perspectives about work demands. I initiated a qualitative study framed by the following questions: What beliefs about instructing adolescents with ASD guide the teaching of these paraeducators? What experiences with content area staff assist these paraeducators in understanding expectations for their instruction? And, what particular instructional opportunities do these paraeducators perceive to be beneficial in supporting their student's learning?

### **Literature Review**

The number of paraprofessionals entering general education classrooms in support of students with special needs has grown significantly. This increase is due in large part to federal legislation that mandates the "least restrictive environment" for special needs students (IDEA, 2004). The law recognizes the authority of licensed content area teachers to educate most students with special needs in a given curriculum (as opposed to personnel who instruct in pull-out settings). The use of additional personnel to support content area teachers is a second feature of federal legislation mandating inclusion. The law includes provisions requiring paraeducators to be adequately trained and supervised when they provide instruction to students (IDEA, 2004).

Pickett, Linkins, & Wallace (2003) estimate that there are over 1.2 million paraeducators employed in public and private schools and in early childhood education programs. The number of those serving students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a one-to-one capacity is unknown. The majority of all paraprofessionals are women who enter the profession while raising their children because the work hours accommodate their home schedules (French, 1999a). According to French (1999a) the average age of paraeducators in the United States is forty. In a study examining paraeducator job retention in North Carolina, Tillery, Werts, Roark, & Harris (2003) found that conductive working conditions, appropriate scheduling, and opportunities to be helpful were among the reasons cited by those who stayed in their positions for greater than five years. Participants also reported that working with children was a reason for their retention. Other studies have found that paraeducators who are satisfied with their positions are those who have pride in what they do, know the importance of their work, and have strong connections to professional staff and students (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French, 1999a; Giangereco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Picket, Linkins, & Wallace, 2003).

Some children with special needs require personal attention that would not otherwise be available to them without the introduction of one-to-one support personnel. Parents and

teachers alike have expressed that inclusion would not be possible if it were not for the paraeducator (French, 1999a). Ashbaker & Morgan (2001) found that rural schools are particularly dependent on paraprofessionals in carrying out the inclusionary needs of special education students because they often lack the monetary compensation to attract teachers who are considered highly qualified. While the needs of rural paraeducators are distinct, Ashbaker & Morgan (2001) indicate that the demands on paraeducators in all contexts have grown more complex as they transition from special education classrooms to inclusive instructional settings. This complexity is especially true given the specialized nature of working with a student with ASD.

Specialized techniques in meeting the individual needs of a student makes rendering a generalized description of the work carried out by paraeducators difficult. In a study examining the employment of paraeducators in Connecticut and Vermont, 47% of the participants reported that they had not received a written job description upon their hiring (Riggs & Mueller, 2001). In their work, Picket, Vasa, & Steckelberg (1993) conceptualize a model for the effective utilization of paraeducators in the classroom. Foremost in their guidelines is the establishment of a written job description of the paraeducator. The description emphasizes the supervisory role of content area teachers during academic periods. The information outlined in the job description states that paraeducators are to implement instructional activities only after such activities are planned by the content area teacher. Teachers, the description continues, are to direct paraeducators during activities, and paraeducators are to provide observations to the teacher on the student's progress in meeting the stated objectives.

Ashbaker, Young, & Morgan (2001) surveyed 159 paraeducators from the United States, Canada, and England and found that 78% of paraeducators in the United States spent the greatest amount of their time instructing students. The bulk of this instruction was aimed at reading and math. When the researchers asked participants who was responsible for allocating the time to specific elements of instructional activities, 56% of the US participants reported that the teacher provided such focus. Canadian paraeducators, on the other hand, reported that teachers provide such focus 45% of the time. And, while US paraeducators reported joint decision-making with the teacher in some aspects of the instructional process, 74% reported spending a majority of their instructional time with a teacher present, whereas 58% of the Canadian and 68% of the English paraeducators worked a majority of their time with a teacher present (Ashbaker et. al., 2001). The variations among these percentages suggest that American paraeducators work more closely with their cooperating teachers when providing instruction to students.

A study of the supervision and management of paraeducators (Dover, 2002) found that clear delineations of responsibilities for general education and special education teachers were lacking. In fact, Dover (2002) found that slightly less than three-fourths of the 369 general and special education teacher respondents had no prior training in the supervision or management of paraeducators. Most teachers perceive supervision to be the role of an administrator. Dover (2002) reported that the respondents did not 'shy away' from supervisory tasks given this perception. The study found that general and special education teachers perform about the same number of supervisory tasks and that these

tasks often overlap. The researcher also identified 27 supervisory tasks and had respondents divide these tasks into an 'ideal' delineation between general and special education supervisors (Dover, 2002). A majority of participants indicated that an equal distribution of supervisory tasks would be an ideal arraignment in the supervision of paraeducators. Greater input by general and special education teachers as to the effective roles of paraeducators in the inclusive setting is one interpretation made of this finding (Dover, 2002).

Studies show that paraeducators believe working collaboratively with teachers is important to their practice (Ashbaker, Young, & Morgan, 2001; Carroll, 2001; Dover, 2002; Riggs & Mueller, 2001). In a recent study of the perceptions of paraeducators as to their roles and responsibilities, Patterson (2006) surveyed twenty-two paraeducators about their interactions with teachers. The data indicated that 59% of participants felt valued as a result of regular consultation time with content area teachers. Unfortunately, such collaboration is difficult to arrange. The lack of collaborative opportunities with content area teachers and special education supervisors is further complicated by the apprehension many paraeducators feel to initiate such meetings. According to Marks, Schrader, & Levine (1999):

*[P]araeducators reported asking for ideas only when they were 'at a loss' for what to do academically. On a whole, paraeducators found themselves waiting for others to make educational decisions that never came, and, when faced with the need to provide instruction and 'on-the-spot' modifications, assumed primary responsibility for the day-to-day educational decisions (p. 320)*

Thus, participants in this study made instructional decisions outside of regular collaboration with teachers and special education supervisors. This finding suggests that these paraeducators may view their role as ancillary, rather than collegial and not shared. A feeling of apprehension is also addressed, as paraeducators do not often initiate supportive moments when failing to acquire instructional strategies that could enhance their one-to-one teaching.

Frustrations experienced by paraeducators are often reported as resulting from unclear expectations for their work (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French 1999b; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). Giangereco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland (1997) observed over 100 paraeducators in sixteen classrooms in an empirical study that documented the effects that paraeducator proximity had on the learning of students with special needs. The researchers were interested in understanding if a paraeducator's proximity to a student accounted for an increase or decrease in the student's involvement in the general education classroom. The primary finding was that when paraeducator proximity to the special needs student was close and sustained this closeness interfered with the general education teacher's responsibility of educating the student with special needs. The researchers found that teachers avoided assuming teaching responsibilities for the student with a disability because of the close proximity of another adult. This avoidance, the researchers observed, created instructional expectations that were 'unrealistic' when it came to the capabilities of the paraeducators. Paraeducators, it was

observed, attempted to perform these teaching tasks defaulted by the teacher even when it became apparent that the venture would not produce the desired instructional results.

Isolation can occur when paraeducators work in close proximity to a single student and assume a wide range of behavioral responsibilities for which they may not be trained. Marks, Schrader, & Levine (1999) studied the perspectives of twenty paraeducators, many of whom also reported taking on the “burden” of inclusion for the students they knew well. The paraeducators reported this “burden” as their sole efforts in trying to reduce the amount of disturbance created by the identified student. And, although participants were generally concerned with disruptions to the other students in the classroom, they were especially attentive in ensuring that the teacher was not bothered by their student. Because both the paraeducators and teachers perceived behavior intervention to be the responsibility of the paraeducator, the participants reported feeling isolated when removing a student from the classroom. Marks, et. al. (1999) document conditions leading to this perception which include having to become the “expert” of their student's needs, wanting to establish an effective partnership with the teachers, and trying to incorporate a multiple of suggestions from professional staff.

When asked directly about their training needs, 200 paraeducators placed at the top of their list wanting to know more about the various disabilities they were working with (Riggs, 2001). Answers to open-ended survey items revealed participants' need to better understand the classification labels of special needs students. The second survey item for which participants expressed agreement was the need for more effective strategies for the behavior management of their students. A desire to be more adept at fostering teamwork and having open communication with teachers was high on the list of perceived training needs, as was a greater understanding of inclusion.

Given my history supervising some twenty paraprofessionals over my eight years as a special education teacher, I was pleasantly surprised to find a large number of literature articles focused on the enhancement of practice for paraeducating in the inclusive classroom. The literature highlighted the growing complexity of the position and recognized the need for a well-defined job description. Researchers also documented that a clear delineation of supervisory tasks for the general and special education staff is lacking. Many paraeducators reported receiving little feedback from their supervisors during the school year. A number of articles acknowledged that the unique training needs of paraeducators continue to go unmet by many school districts. Consequently, paraeducators learn the responsibilities of their position not from the professional staff who are ultimately held responsible for the instruction of all children in their classroom but from other paraprofessionals or on their own.

### **Methodology**

Concluding the literature review, I began to design my study of paraeducator perspectives. As I considered who might comprise my participant sample, I wanted to include those who worked one-to-one with a student in the inclusive setting. Initially, I was unaware that six of the eighteen paraeducators at my school worked exclusively with

a student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). When I discovered this fact, I reframed my study to focus on this sub-set of potential participants. Five agreed to participate.

Table 1 represents the participant demographics. Of the five who agreed to participate in this study, four are male and one is female. Three held bachelor's degrees, one of which was in education, and one paraeducator was finishing his associate's degree in human services. Each participant had more than two years experience in the field of education, with three years experience being the median. One participant had spent sixteen years in education. Three of the students supported by these paraeducators were seniors, one a junior and the other a freshman.

*Table 1*  
Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Pseudonym	Highest level of education	Years of experience	Year of student served	Pseudonym of student
1	F	65	Ms. Bauer	HS	16	First year	Roger
2	M	58	Mr. Klein	MS	5	Third year	Cindy
3	M	43	Mr. Johnston	BS	3	Fourth year	Tom
4	M	42	Mr. Godard	BA	2	Fourth year	Max
5	M	37	Mr. Eberlee	HS	3	Fourth year	Larry

*Note.* F=Female, M=Male, HS=High School Diploma, MS=Masters of Science Degree, BA=Bachelor of Arts Degree, BS=Bachelor of Science Degree.

For this study I utilized a case study design (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Yin, 1998) that assisted me to analyze the case of paraeducator perspectives. To document this case, I began collecting material artifacts that oriented me to participants' practice in the sight of study. During the initial phase of data collection, I administered a Likert-scale survey (see Appendix). I collected observational fieldnotes over a six week period during instruction in five inclusive classrooms. Courses included calculus, physics, civics, and grades 11 and 12 English. Observations consisted of typical classroom activities such as large and small group instruction, transitions between activities, and assessments. I observed each participant four times, each session lasting twenty minutes.

Collected print data were the basis for generating two structured interview protocols, individual and focus group, that would assist me to understand the perceptions these five paraeducators held about their instruction, experiences with content area teachers, and their instructional opportunities. During a ten week period, I conducted five structured individual interviews, ranging in length from 20 to 63 minutes. The interview focus group was comprised of three participants and lasted 67 minutes. These spoken word data were transcribed, de-identified, and cleansed.

To analyze all data, I used an inductive approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that began with an initial coding run to generate potential master and sub-codes. In a second data

run, to establish internal validity, these master and sub-codes were applied and revised as required. Once a stable set of master and sub-codes were in place, I developed a coding dictionary and coding map to insure reliability across subsequent coding sessions. From the most salient coded material, I identified three key themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that will be reported here.

## **Discussion**

In order for me to better support paraeducators, I realized the need to understand my participants' perspectives. I wanted to consider the beliefs they held about their instruction of special needs adolescents, to document the experiences with content area staff that assisted them to understand the expectations of their instruction, and to acknowledge the instructional opportunities they perceived to be beneficial. In the following discussion, I address three themes that emerged from my investigation of participant's believes. These themes including the following: understanding their student, supporting the demands of instruction, and providing behavioral interventions.

### **Understanding their Student**

The following discussion addresses participants' understanding of their practice. Data revealed participants' agreement that understanding their practice involved first understanding their student. To this end, the following were priorities: (a) discerning the unique characteristics of their student's Autism, (b) assessing their student's academic capabilities, and (c) engaging their student in various contexts.

At the core of conceptualizing their practice, all participants in this study discussed the need to understand Autism, and more specifically their student's Autism. As one participant stated, "Qualities for a one-to-one [paraeducator] would be understanding Autism, first of all. And then understanding that not all students with Autism are the same. There's no cookie cutter that makes them anywhere near the same." By better understanding Autism as a condition, and how it affects their student's participation in the inclusive classroom, participants felt they increased their understanding of effective practice.

Four of the five participants described the process they relied on to understand their student's disability. This process consisted first of observation. All participants reported monitoring their students before, during, and after instruction. Participants also reported reflective questioning based on the interactions they had with their student. Examples of questions noted by participants included the following: "What makes him tick?", "Where is his mind right now?", "Where did that unusual comment come from?" For all participants, questioning these interactions was a context for forming hypotheses about the effects Autism had on their student. Ms. Bauer discussed this reflective process when she talked about her work with Roger.

What I try to do is find out about my kid. There are so many different levels of Autism and Asperger's, [so] you have to find out where the kid is at [on the spectrum of Autism]. In Roger's case this is his first year in public school; he's sixteen years-old. So, you have

to find out, what's going to make him comfortable? Is it going to bother him if I get up [during class] and point out, 'Roger, you missed this. Let's get on with it'? I've worked with some [students] that had a very short fuse and didn't want you to bother them. So, learning where your kid is at [on the spectrum of Autism] is pretty much what you do. Ms. Bauer indicates that each student with autism with whom she has worked with varied in their tolerance of her support. By understanding that there are degrees of Autism symptoms, Ms. Bauer initially appears to have approached Roger with caution in order to assess exactly how his disability was going to behaviorally manifest itself when she provided instructional support. By identifying Roger's tolerance for classroom assistance, Ms. Bauer achieved understanding central to Roger's learning.

In addition to identifying their students' degree of disability, participants emphasized that achieving understanding also demanded assessing their student's academic capabilities during instructional activities. Observations revealed that participants assessed their students' abilities across a wide range of activities. Four of the five participants reported that this information allowed them to divert their student from behavioral incidents arising from task demands. Mr. Godard, who supported Max, a senior, elaborated:

You need to learn how tolerant your student is to learning. [You ask] how much they can learn before they pretty much stop learning? [Or], where their working memory hits a point where it collapses and they're pretty much done learning? They're not going to learn anymore ... So, you need to learn about how much your student can take before they reach that point. Then [you] can avoid that [situation] so you can move the student along and not create a breakdown.

Mr. Godard's comment implies that he reflects on Max's efforts during instructional activities to gauge the efficiency of his working memory. He suggests that Max may not be able to fully complete all the instructional activities demanded by the teacher. By understanding at what point Max's working memory becomes inefficient during these activities, however, Mr. Godard is able to support him, thus decreasing the likelihood of inappropriate behavior.

The data identified another strategy participants used to assess their students' learning capacities. My observation of participants' practice showed that three of the five assessed their student's classroom capabilities not only by monitoring the student as they engaged in independent activity, but by working jointly with the student as s/he completed assignments. I observed that these three participants routinely probed their student's knowledge during this joint work by asking clarifying questions that allowed them to gauge their students' understanding of the instructional activity. These participants exhibited a greater level of support when their student appeared to be unable to answer these probes.

Identifying their students' disabilities and assessing their academic capabilities were just two practices considered central to increasing paraeducators' understanding. A third strategy identified by all participants was their engagement with the student across all contexts of activity. Participants reported that their engagement in these various

activities lead to a deeper understanding of the student on a personal level. Mr. Eberlee, a participant who had worked with the same student for two years, reported the importance of engaging with his student in various contexts throughout the school day. He noted, “Like, for instance, the walks we take around the school. It’s a relaxed atmosphere to where he opens up a lot better and easier. It’s just he and I, and you get to learn more about who he is and about his life and what he wants to do in the future.” Mr. Eberlee explained that he goes on these walks after his student Larry has completed homework in study hall. Larry and Mr. Eberlee’s walks are still a one-to-one activity, yet Mr. Eberlee asserts that outside the structured classroom environment his student is more relaxed, allowing for open communication, an understanding central to his practice.

Mr. Johnston reported a similar conviction in his individual interview when he discussed his student’s mid-year transition to a vocational setting. Mr. Johnston explained, “In my case being off campus in a different environment is actually to the benefit of our relationship.” He reported that his student Tom began school overwhelmed by the demands placed on him, which lead to numerous non-compliance behaviors. In this context, Mr. Johnston discussed the difficulty he had in establishing a working relationship with Tom. However, Tom presented a new, more open, personality once relocated to an off campus job sight for part of the week. Mr. Johnston explained, “[He has] kind of an in-school persona verses a public persona.” Mr. Johnston’s comments suggest that Tom, once transitioned to a vocational setting, took on a persona that was more open to the development of a working relationship.

In asking about the perception that guides their work, I had hoped to understand how paraeducators entered their profession. It is clear that these participants first approached the job by learning about ASD and how the symptoms manifested in their student. I was unable, however, to discover the process by which these paraeducators were instructed about Autism.

### **Supporting the Demands of Instruction**

The following discussion addresses the support participants provided their students in the inclusive classroom. Data revealed that participants employed a wide range of methods to support their students’ responses to task demands. The three methods of support participants referenced included the following: (a) encouraging their student to engage in instructional activities, (b) redirecting their student during instructional activities, and (c) performing instructional activities jointly in order to complete the demand of the task.

Encouraging students to engage in instructional activities was frequently reported by participants in their interviews. As Mr. Godard stated, “You want to be direct about things. Also, [you] lead them to believe that they [students] can do something. For instance, if they’ve already done something, you say, ‘Look. You’ve done this. You can do this now.’ So, making them a believer in themselves is always what you do.” Mr. Godard indicates that a student with Autism may have difficulty completing a teacher’s task demand even if the student has already performed the demand in the past. It also

appears that Mr. Godard links task completion with a student's self-esteem by suggesting that students need first to believe in themselves to complete a task that they have refused.

Mr. Klein reported a different understanding as to the reason why encouragement is necessary. He was a father of a grown son with Autism. He also supported Cindy, a third-year student who's one-to-one support service would soon end due to her improvements academically and socially. Mr. Klien discussed having to continually transition a student toward independence by encouraging them to recognize their strengths:

What we need to do with a student with Autism is we need to push them past their levels of comfort. As a one-to-one, that is what we got to do. I think it is part of what we need to do as part of the educational environment, too. We need to understand were those comfort zone are for them. And [these comfort zones] are part of the disability and they are part of the normal every day, everybody—we all have them. But, we got to push them [the students with Autism] through their levels of comfort. And, what you have to do is build confidence in your student. You have to build their confidence in their ability to push past their comfort zone. And sometimes you really have to push them hard to do that. You know, this isn't something they're going to jump out and say, 'Yeah, I'm ready to do that!' They won't do that. You got to push them into that environment. It is not an environment that is easy for them to do.

In his statement, Mr. Klein recognizes that a student with Autism may feel a level of comfort from the support they receive by a one-to-one paraeducator. It may be this comfort, however, that holds a student back from taking on the challenges of instruction, thus instilling complacency. In fact, Mr. Klein's comment suggests that a student who finds comfort in support will not willingly put themselves in a difficult situation. There appears to be a certain level of complacency established on the part of a school culture, as well. This systemic comfort needs self-monitoring from the one-to-one in order to maximize the benefit provided to the student. For Mr. Klein, constantly encouraging Cindy to challenge her own comfort while at school may allow her to gain independence in a classroom.

In addition to providing encouragement, participants were routinely observed redirecting their students back to the academic activity in which they were engaged. During one observation of Ms. Bauer's one-to-one instruction with Roger, I observed sixteen distinct attempts to redirect his behavior. The most frequent redirection technique she used was to point to a section on his quiz and say, 'right here, Roger.' Roger would then look to where her finger pointed. On three occasions, however, Ms. Bauer was observed pointing to fill-in-the-blank questions on the quiz with her thumb and reading them aloud. Roger would answer her softly before writing in the response. During another incident she observed Roger flipping his quiz to the back page. "Wrong page," Ms. Bauer responded. She turned the quiz back over. When Roger initially skipped a question early in the quiz because he was unsure of the plural form of the answer, Ms. Bauer pointed to the blank line and said, "Use the 's'".

When it appeared that encouragement and redirection were not sufficient in supporting their students, participants were observed jointly participating in the instructional activity. A majority of the participants were observed jointly performing note taking activities demanded by the teacher. The most occurring demand participants jointly participated in with their student was note taking during lectures. In all twenty observations, teachers required students to take some form of lecture based notes. Only one participant did not jointly perform this activity and instead monitored his student. Another reported that his student applied heavy pressure on the pencil when writing. Aware that his student's hand would begin hurting after a few minutes of note taking, Mr. Johnston was observed as the only one of the pair taking notes. He elaborated:

*I was a little skeptical with Tom in that I should necessarily be a scribe for him in all circumstances. But, I think I've seen some effectiveness in him being able to take notes in class and [I] urge him to do the best he can with notes ... If he sees that I'm consistent with my carrying through and offering assistance it builds that trusting relationship, which is essential and core to being an effective one-on-one.*

Mr. Johnston's implies that Tom may not be able to keep up with the demand of note taking in this particular class. Therefore, he takes notes without requiring Tom to as well. Still, Mr. Johnston's initial appraisal of Tom's lack of participation appears to suggest that Tom might have been using his disability to escape the task of note taking. By continually offering support, however, Mr. Johnston reports that he has moved Tom into taking on some independence in his note taking. These opportunities appear to be at Tom's discretion.

What has become clear in this data is that paraeducators often take on an academic role during classroom instruction. Though not trained in every subject taken by their student, paraeducators offer joint support to aide them in meeting the demands of the classroom.

### **Providing Behavioral Interventions**

The following discussion addresses the behavioral intervention strategies in which participants engaged. The data revealed that participants utilized only a few intervention strategies in promoting positive behavioral outcomes when their students engaged in classroom activities. The following three strategies were noted: (a) modeling desirable behavior, (b) removing the student from the environment, and (c) deescalating behavior and following-up.

All participants discussed the importance of modeling desirable classroom attributes as a means to decrease difficulties for their student. And, while participants described modeling different behaviors, four independently discussed modeling self-restrained behavior as the most desirable. For these participants, self-restrained behavior was often described paradoxically as not overreacting to unmet classroom expectations, but taking seriously the demands of instructional activities. Participants also indicated that modeling desirable behavior required taking a firm, yet encouraging, position when completing classroom tasks jointly with their student. Ms. Bauer explained, "In Roger's

case it's a matter of keeping him comfortable, settled. But not, I would use the word, 'molly-coddle' him. In other words, it's not a big deal to me [if I make a mistake] so it should not be to him ... You keep him comfortable and don't blow things out of proportion. Because with, Roger, especially, if he thinks that something is wrong, or that he's done something that is not right, he gets very upset." Ms. Bauer concludes that Roger may require a certain level of comfort during instruction in order to not become upset. Her explanation appears to imply that Roger becomes mad when he does commit an error in class. Therefore, Ms. Bauer models a steady demeanor when completing classroom activities even if Roger makes a mistake. Her comment also seems to suggest that she trivializes Roger's errors in an effort to have him continue his work.

Three of the five participants referenced removing a student from the classroom if he or she presented behavioral challenges. Participants frequently referenced students' inattention to classroom instruction as the behavior that warranted removal. During observations, however, the removal of a student from the classroom never occurred. Two years prior to working with Larry, Mr. Eberlee reported working with a student who presented a host of behavioral challenges. Central to the difficulty, Mr. Eberlee discussed, was the student's perseveration:

He [the student] would always have his favorite bands, his favorite movies, on his mind. So, I don't know how much he really got out of class, only because he was always focused on what's in his head, which was his favorite music groups. And it was extremely hard to get him focused. And, if he didn't want to learn something or if he didn't want to pay attention, then he wasn't going to do it. There was no way really [to get him focused]. You would have to ask him to step out of the classroom and go for a walk. But, that didn't get him refocused, either.

Mr. Eberlee speculates that his student exhibited difficulty learning in the classroom because he was distracted by his own interests. In an effort to provide behavioral support, Mr. Eberlee took this student out of the environment to engage him in a physical activity. In this case, while Mr. Eberlee notes the use of behavioral intervention, he is also upfront that his strategies do not necessarily work. This finding is consistent with current research addressing the need for paraeducators' access to training in effective behavioral interventions.

Modeling desirable classroom attributes and removing a student from the environment were just two techniques participants utilized when supporting their students behaviorally. Another technique participants referenced during the focus group interview was using the information gleaned from their relationship with the student as a tool to deescalate a tense situation. Participants reported that during these tense situations they redirected their students' focus away from the difficulty they were experiencing and on to a thought more personal in nature. Once the student became less agitated, the participants were able to follow-up with them and provide positive alternatives to use in the future. Mr. Godard noted and recalled student who had physically assaulted his prior one-to-one instructor. With this student, Mr. Godard respected the need for mutual dependence.

This student had a way to make people very angry with him and practically dislike him ... And, he was a big kid, but everything [he did] wrong would be 'we'. You know, he would say, 'we did this', or 'we did that'. He was not going to let you separate yourself from him. And, I never got smacked in the face. I think it's because I was always like, 'us'. I'd refer to 'us' all the time, too. 'You and I, right?' Not just you [the student] ... And I would try my best not to get angry because that would do no good. That would just get him going. And, like I said, I referred to 'us', 'you and I'. However, I was assertive enough to say, 'Okay. Now, I need to bring this up with you. Now, it is time to say something.' And he got pretty good with that technique.

Mr. Godard's comment implies that his past student may have been unable to separate himself from his one-on-one paraeducator during a difficult situation. Mr. Godard intimates that through his continued demonstration of a relationship to this student he was able to deescalate these tense moments. Conversely, this student would be less able to deescalate if Mr. Godard became upset at him. In fact, becoming upset with this student appears to increase the likelihood of aggression. Mr. Godard's statement also indicates that he would follow-up the behavioral incident once calm was restored. He reported that this student became better able to use this technique.

I had expected to find that paraeducators, more often than not, reported pulling their students out of the classroom when challenging behaviors arose than remain in the classroom to intervene. The participants in this study appear to use removal from the classroom as a last resort. Also, rather than a punishment, paraeducators encouraged positive intervention to help the student transition back into the classroom.

## Conclusion

I entered into this study as a way to understand the perspectives of paraeducators supporting a student with Autism in the general education setting. As a supervisor of paraeducators I have been available to discuss with them their concerns about job performance. Yet privately, I have acknowledged that conversation alone has not been effective in fully supporting their growth. In concluding this study, however, I am struck by how thoughtful my participants were about their students. They were open and honest about the challenges they faced on the job and were as equally frank when discussing the time they spent with the students. In fact, I am surprised by just how much they knew about their students and the condition which affects them.

## References

- Ashbaker, B., & Morgan, J. (2001). Growing roles for teachers' aides. *The Education Digest*, 66(7), 60. Retrieved [November 2, 2008] from Academic Search Premier database.

- Ashbaker, B., Young, J. R., Morgan, J. (2001). Paraeducators: Their roles in the instructional process. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Dallas, TX.
- Carroll, D. (2001). Considering paraeducator training, roles, and responsibilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 34(2), 60-64.
- Dover, W. (2002). Instructional management of paraeducators in inclusive classrooms: The perspectives of the teachers. In: *No Child Left Behind: The Vital Role of Rural Schools*. Annual National Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education. Reno, NV.
- Downing, J., Ryndak, D., & Clark, D. (2000). Paraeducators in inclusive classrooms: Their own perceptions. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(3), 171-181.
- Dyson, A.H., & Genishi, C. (2005). *On the case: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- French, N. K. (1999a). Paraeducators: Who are they and what do they do? *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 32(1), 65-69.
- French, N. K. (1999b). Paraeducators and teachers: Shifting roles. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 32(2), 69-73.
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S. & Broer, S. (2001). Respect, appreciation, and acknowledgment of paraprofessionals who support students with disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 485-498.
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S., Broer, S., & Doyle, M. (2001). Paraprofessional support of students with disabilities: Literature from the past decade. *Exceptional Children*, 68(1), 45-63.
- Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S., Luiselli, T. E., & MacFarland, S. Z. C. (1997). Helping or hovering? Effects of instructional assistant proximity on students with disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 64, 7-18.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446. 108 Cong. (ERIC Documentation Reproduction Service No. ED 489 513).
- Marks, S. U., Schrader, C., & Levine, M. (1999). Paraeducator experiences in inclusive settings: Helping, hovering, or holding their own? *Exceptional Children*, 65(3), 315-328.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Patterson, K. B. (2006). Roles and responsibilities of paraeducators: In their own words. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(5), Article 1. Retrieved [November 2, 2008] from <http://esceholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol2/iss5/art1>
- Pickett, A. L., Linkins, M., & Wallace, T. (2003). *The employment and preparation of paraeducators, the state of the art-2003*. New York: National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Service, City University of New York. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 474 398)
- Pickett, A. L., Vasa, S., & Steckelberg, A. L. (1993). *Using paraeducators effectively in the classroom*, Fastback #358. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa.
- Riggs, C. G. (2001). Ask the paraprofessionals: What are your training needs? *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 33(3), 78-83.

- Riggs, C. G. & Mueller, P. (2001). Employment and utilization of paraeducators in inclusive settings. *The Journal of Special Education*, 35(1), 54-62.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tillery, C. Y., Werts, M. G., Roark, R., & Harris, S. (2003). Perceptions of paraeducators on job retention. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 26, 118-127.
- Yin, R. K. (1998). *The abridged version of case study research: Design and method*. In L. Bickman and D. J. Rog Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.